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Decline in coups around the world is a mixed blessing

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Coups, which once were a staple diet for an unstable third world, are occurring with much less frequency these days.

Last year's ouster of Mauritania's military leader was an exception to the rule. Today, in much of the developing world, more sophisticated methods of state control are able to repress dissent and prevent sudden government takeovers more effectively than in the past.

This is true even though destabilizing economic and population trends continue unabated and, indeed, get worse in many areas.

Ironically, some short-term effects of this increased ability to repress dissent can be beneficial:

- Economic development programs are less frequently disrupted by abrupt leadership changes. Most economists agree that a violent *coup d'état* can cost a developing country

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years in its development process. Foreign investment flows more rapidly when uncertainty is minimized.

- Policymakers can generally count on greater continuity in the areas for which they bear responsibility. Intelligence reporting and scholarly analysis of future trends can also profit from a more stable environment. At the same time, attention to basic evolutionary trends becomes more critical and their detection more difficult.

- Claims that communist revolutions are proving largely irreversible must be viewed in the context of this trend. The fact is that most governments now have a longer life span than a decade ago. And conservative monarchies are no longer automatically considered vulnerable relics ripe for revolt.

For example, between 1955 and 1969, well over 15 illegal changes of government occurred in eight countries in the Middle East and North

Africa. Iraq and Syria accounted for six of these changes. Other countries affected were North and South Yemen, Turkey, Sudan, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Egypt had its single successful revolution in 1952.

Between 1970 and 1984, only six illegal government changes occurred in four Middle East countries. Four of these were in the chronically unstable Yemens, the other two in Iran and Turkey. Both Egypt and Lebanon experienced presidential assassinations during this period, but no change in political complexion of the ruling group. Notably, Syria has been ruled by the same government since late 1970. With some reshuffling, Iraq has been essentially stable since 1968.

Other areas, such as black Africa, have experienced a similar lessening in the frequency of violent changes by classic *coups d'état*.

Why has this relative stability appeared? One answer is obvious — the turbulence of the post-colonial era required time to die down. Stable institutions do not emerge overnight.

But other factors exist as well, some of which bring mixed blessings.

Regimes of all political stripes are far more conscious of the nature of internal threats to their stability — and the patterns by which they emerge. Intensive security assistance programs by Eastern and Western states have developed third-world expertise in areas such as protection of senior politicians, rapid reaction to threats, and penetration of potentially hostile groups.

The tools of ensuring loyalty have also become more effective and technologically advanced. These include rapid communications, efficient monitoring facilities, propaganda techniques, control of foreign influences, and censorship.

In some cases, the ruthlessness with which opposition is suppressed has intensified considerably. Syrian President Hafez Assad's 1982 eradication of several thousand Sunni Muslim conservative opponents in Hama, and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's harsh treatment of political adversaries are specific cases in point. While such tactics may not enhance a regime's popularity or moral standing, they often do increase its longevity.

If the new situation results in greater stability over time, this has some positive elements. It could release energies for progress which would otherwise be spent in conspiratorial machinations and their bloody effects.

But if the result is ever-increasing repression and stifling of these very energies, the cost of stability will be high indeed. It will also be illusory, as longer-term pressures may merely erupt later in yet more dramatic fashion. Iran's example cannot be ignored.

The challenge for the West becomes to encourage evolutionary change in a world where repression is more effective than it was two decades ago.

The writer was a government official for two decades before becoming a consultant on international affairs.